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Chün-fang Yü, *Passing the Light: The Incense Light Community and Buddhist Nuns in Contemporary Taiwan*,

Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2013, 264 pp.

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norms, but also by those same people's biographies and trajectories (p. 43). It shows that the human experience of migration may never be fully shaped by or reduced to a simple mono-causal narrative.

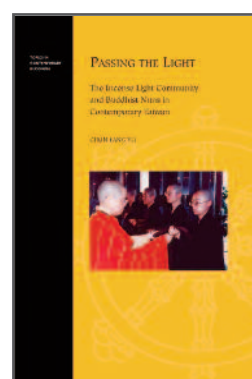
A note of criticism and a suggestion regarding an otherwise very accomplished and fine-grained ethnographic study: while the author does not fail to underline the role of post-Mao era ideologies, and particularly the discourse on the putatively low level of "quality" (*suzhi*) of rural people, as a "tool of domination" (p. 98), one would have expected further engagement with existing scholarship that stresses the role of the labour-market and state institutions in shaping rural migrant women's subjectivities,⁽¹⁾ or with studies that highlight the role of Party-state sponsored institutions in shaping or formatting migrant workers' narratives of their migration and work experience. Tamara Jacka, for instance, has highlighted the fact that the specific goals pursued by these institutions – the Migrant Women's Club where Gaetano has carried out fieldwork is one of these – and their understanding of class and gender differences strongly shaped the kinds of narratives and representations produced by migrant women via the mediation of these institutions.⁽²⁾ There is a need to more closely relate the role of institutions to the shaping of narratives and of subjectivities, even though these institutions are never either entirely saturating subjectivities or the sole forces to be taken into account in these processes. Similarly, Gaetano notes the ubiquity of catchphrases such as "self-development," "improving quality," or "challenging oneself" in rural migrant women's rationales for migration. The interest here may lie in investigating further in which respect such narratives are linked intertextually to various forms of public narratives or if they may be related to patterned institutional practices aimed at specific publics. Moreover, what do these narrative tropes of self-transformation mean for the people who draw on them, and how are these actually related to their specific biographical trajectories? These questions are left untouched. Also, the political nature of people's choices related to migration decisions is on the whole left undiscussed, as is the inevitability of migration decisions linked to the devaluation of the countryside and to the production of a politics of desire related to urban consumption and lifestyles. These "choices" are political precisely because they appear so inevitable and are expressed in such ubiquitous forms, for as Lisa Rofel has argued, in post-Mao China power "operates precisely in those realms it has made liberatory" (the labour market and employment choices, for instance).⁽³⁾

Secondly, while Gaetano does highlight the indignities as well as the economic uncertainties migrant women face, on the whole the migrant women she has interviewed hold a positive view of migration, and in her conclusion, Gaetano argues that "over the long term, migration especially empowers some rural women and advances gender equality by enabling greater autonomy in courtship and marriage" (p. 134). One would have hoped for some space to also be devoted to the tales of rather unsuccessful, disillusioned, or resentful migrant women. Similarly, it would have been worth discussing the overall rather positive outlook on migration and life outside the village obtained through the author's ethnographic work in the domestic services, office-cleaning, and hotel service sectors and confront these insights with recent scholarship on the manufacturing and construction sectors, which provide a far more bleak and precarious picture regarding workers' conditions and expectations for the future. This would have enabled a discussion of the specific features of work sectors as well as the degree to which the overall optimistic outlook provided within this volume may or may not be related to the biographic trajectories of the author's key informants.⁽⁴⁾

That being said, this volume will be highly appealing to scholars interested in migration and gender studies. It will also be very useful as a textbook or assigned reading for students of contemporary China and of migration.

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1. See for instance Yan Hairong, "Neo-liberal Governmentality and Neo-humanism: Organizing Suzhi/Value Flow through Labour Recruitment Networks," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2003, pp. 493-523. For a critical appraisal of the association of "suzhi" discourse with neoliberal governmentality, see Andrew Kipnis, "Neoliberalism Reified: Suzhi Discourse and Tropes of Neoliberalism in the PRC," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 13, No. 2, June 2006, pp. 383-400.
2. Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration and Social Change*, Armonk, NY, M. E. Sharpe, 2006, 329 pp.
3. Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1999, pp. 29-33.
4. See for instance, Pun Ngai, *Migrant Labor in China: Post-Socialist Transformations*, Cambridge, UK, Malden, MA, Polity Press, 2016, 204 pp.



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Passing the Light: The Incense
Light Community and Buddhist
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This is an essential publication for anyone wishing to gain a deeper understanding of female monasticism in Buddhism. It offers the reader an immersive look into Incense Light (*Xiangguang*), a community of nuns formed in Taiwan in 1974, where the author carried out a lengthy period of fieldwork. A historian by training, in her previous works Chün-fang Yü had mostly focused on the transformation and development of Buddhism in the pre-modern era. With its contemporary setting, *Passing the Light* constitutes a break from this tradition. It is, in addition, the author's first study of the nuns and their approach to modernity.

While many twenty-first century works have examined the phenomenon of the growing number of women among the monastic orders of Taiwan, few have touched on the ways in which one of these communities can be transformed by globalisation. This is what Chün-fang Yü has set out to do by studying the missions that these nuns are undertaking in education and in their practice. She points out – and this is the book's connecting thread – that the nuns have fashioned their own approach to Buddhism due to a lack of pre-existing traditions upon their arrival. Their community is therefore a very real example of the reinvention of contemporary Buddhism. Drawing upon a variety of sources, the book seeks to resolve a paradox: how the members of the community are preserving tradition while simultaneously distancing themselves from it. The book's appeal lies in the fact that the author is able to link her vast knowledge of the history of mutations in Buddhism to an in-depth study of a contemporary phenomenon.

In a first, introductory chapter, the author looks at collections of hagiographic works: *Lives of the Nuns* (*Biqiuni zhuan*), written in AD 516, and *Lives of the Nuns: Continued* (*Xu biqiuni zhuan*), written in the twentieth century by a disciple of Taixu. Examining these collections gives the author an opportunity to outline the status and perceptions of nuns throughout China's history, even though the nuns in question are not indicative of the norm. Following on from this, she explores changing perceptions of nuns in various forms of writing. These perceptions are often condescending: the women are seen as objects of pity because they don't enter into religion by choice. Furthermore, they represent everything that Confucian society rejects: their way of life goes against filial piety and they make no contribution to the economy. Only when the 1980s begin does the author note a change: the women begin to stand up for their choices. According to Chün-fang Yü, this coincides with the arrival of the first generation to benefit from the law stipulating nine years of mandatory education in Taiwan, announced in 1968. Another contributing factor is the development of "Humanistic Buddhism" in Taiwan at the beginning of the twentieth century: certain leaders advocate a spirituality that is independent of gender. This movement, which had a powerful influence on the administration of Xiangguang, stresses the importance of social reconstruction and education. According to the author, it is the latter that sets the nuns in Taiwan apart. Many of them are educated to university level and bring their expertise to the monastery. This may explain in part the innovations that have taken place in the way Xiangguang is run, and in the methods of teaching on offer.

The second and third chapters are dedicated to chronicling the history of the community and its current abbess, Wuyin, who has held the position since 1980. After the first nuns moved there in 1974, a number of non-Buddhist features were removed in the many renovation projects that were carried out on the original temple. The author demonstrates that efforts such as these show a clear desire among the first residents to break with the traditional model and create a new religious identity. Three nuns had a significant influence on the direction this new search for identity took, thanks to their progressive ideas: Xinzhi, Wuyin and Mingjia. In the author's view, these three figures are significant because they were responsible for laying the foundations that made the reinvention of contemporary Buddhism possible. For example, they established the Incense Light Buddhist Seminary for Nuns in 1980, followed by Buddhist classes for adults in 1984. The author paints a portrait of Wuyin, the progressive abbess, through the eyes of the members of her community. The interviews with her provide firm proof that she is not a feminist, but simply wishes to question male-female inequality and traditional representations: for instance, that nuns must be taught by nuns, and should only eliminate their feminine characteristics in order to sidestep any question of gender in the face of spiritual accomplishment.

In the fourth chapter, the author explains the workings of college Buddhist studies societies. These are often the first point of contact that young educated women will have with Buddhism, and play a major role in their decision to join the orders. The primary aim of these study societies is to revive a secular Buddhist way of life, which in turn will help to change society's outlook. This concept was developed by secular Buddhists who believed that a Buddhist resurgence could only be brought about by educated individuals. In Taiwan, two secular Buddhists in particular allowed societies like these to set up on campus: Zhou Xuande and Li Bingnan, whose life and efforts the book describes in detail.

The fifth and sixth chapters provide an exhaustive description of two programmes set up by the members of the Xiangguang community: the

Buddhist seminary for nuns and the Buddhist adult classes. The inclusion of sources such as course books and students' homework allows the reader to fully comprehend the system of teaching practiced by the community. It transpires that contemporary topics are chosen for examinations and homework in order to retain a close connection with the lives of non-religious people, and that teaching focuses on pre-sectarian Buddhism, rather than any specific school, in order to reach the widest audience possible. These measures are designed to appeal to the non-religious, who then become patrons who can help fulfil the needs of the community.

The seventh and final chapter is dedicated to depicting the nuns who have been part of the Xiangguang community. The author shows how much these nuns have contributed to the development of Xiangguang by drawing up a number of proposals aimed at modernising the way the community is run. One proposal involves modifying the rota system for daily tasks, while another suggests creating an educational resource centre to update teachings and practices. They also thought that a body of rules should be created for the *sangha* of the community, or that experts should be invited from outside to give classes. Apart from outlining the nuns' many contributions, these personal portraits aim to examine the factors affecting religious vocation.

In a short conclusion, the author discusses the community's future, which she claims is linked to changes in Taiwanese society. Currently, the challenge for Xiangguang is to improve attendance numbers at the adult classes. In fact, these classes are integral to the community's economic security, which is threatened by competition from similar developing programmes. Another challenge is finding an alternative to the nuns' teaching missions, because these are becoming so time-consuming that they are struggling to find the time for religious practice. In the end, the author is led to wonder whether the idiosyncratic nature of Xiangguang's unique religious identity might also end up jeopardising its reputation among lay people. In fact, if this reinvention of Buddhism is taken too far, could it run the risk of losing touch with the reference points agreed upon by secular and religious people alike?

All told, *Passing the Light* is indispensable for those wishing to understand what it means "to be a nun" in Taiwan, but it's also essential for anyone who is studying the role of nuns and the changes Buddhism has undergone in contemporary society. That said, while the author's observations are highly relevant, the emphasis she places on the originality of the object of study is debatable. For example, she mentions that the members of Xiangguang conceal their femininity, not in order to look like a man, but to transcend the idea of gender. On the other hand, they see this same femininity as an essence that is, according to Wuyin, very similar to the essence of Buddhism, which could explain why Buddhism holds such an appeal for them. However, this contradiction, which the author presents as unique to this community, has also been found in other communities. Furthermore, Chün-fang Yü notes that the community's programme of study and religious identity prioritises pre-sectarian Buddhism over the Chinese traditions. One might ask if this doesn't conceal an underlying desire to make a distinction from the traditions of the mainland and forge a Buddhist identity unique to Taiwan. The book does not touch on this issue, and it is a gap that might be filled, for example, by comparative studies on the role of Chinese and Taiwanese nuns in their respective societies.

■ Translated by David Buchanan.

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